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# THE CRAYON.

Volume VIII.

JULY.

Part VII.

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PUBLICATION OFFICE, 55 WALKER ST., N. Y.

## OUR AMERICAN POETS.

### II.

It is not necessary for a man to write an epic to prove himself a poet. Some of the names which rise spontaneously to the mind as masters of the poetic art, are of those who never attempted to follow with straining pinion the flight of those adventurous singers who lead us through a score of books of heroic rhyme, before they allow us to land among the usually cold realities of the prosaic present (for when epics are being acted, they are neither written nor read). And we like these modest poets all the better for their wise forbearance. The world could not endure too many epics, and but few even among genuine poets could write them if they tried.

In the lapse of thousands of years, through varied civilizations, under a cultivated paganism, and under Christian development; during periods when men of letters have been the favorites of courts and the pampered pets of emperors; during other seasons when obscurity and seclusion left the *littérateurs* of the world, undisturbed by its "poms and vanities," and cares—under every changing fortune of race and climate, the epic power has been successfully invoked, in no more than six or seven individuals since the bard of Chios electrified Greece with his immortal song.

When we have named Homer and Virgil, Dante and Tasso, Camoëns and Milton, whom have we left out, who is peer to them? We might make another class, of which Voltaire with his "*Henriade*" might stand at the head, but what would he be worth who stood at the foot? Better not be named at all.

Edgar A. Poe, in a discussion of a poetic principle, says, "I hold that a long poem does not exist." In explanation of which seeming untruth, he gives it as his opinion, that a piece of writing is only properly named a poem which "excites by elevating the soul," and dogmatically asserts that no one can experience such elevation "for more than half an hour!" To those who remember the first poetic intoxication of their youth, when they had seized upon and read with an avidity rarely equalled since, the *Iliad* or *Odyssey*, and with what impatience they long to follow the after-fortunes of the Trojan heroes in the *Æneid*, this will be news indeed. Or, miss-

ing these "mis-called poems," have laid their novice hands upon the *Lay of the Last Minstrel*, the *Lady of the Lake* and *Marmion*—did the poetic sympathy excited flag at the end of thirty minutes? Well do we remember the vacation weeks, when a stock of these "long poems," ancient and modern, first fell into our hands, our brief thirty days were far too short to exhaust our continued enthusiasm. And so, despite Edgar A. Poe's dogmatism, we doubt not thousands have felt before and since.

But judging by the success of our early American epicians, Poe may be nearer right when he declares, "the day of these artistic anomalies are over: if at any time any very long poem were popular in reality—which I doubt—it is at least clear that no very long poem will ever be popular again." This idea strikes us as one which could never have emanated from any other mind than that of the American—a mind prone to haste, and impatient of completion; one accustomed to see the beginning and end of things; a wilderness displaced by a town; the township resolving itself into a city, a government erected and destroyed within its own lifetime. The opinion may become a truth with us, but we doubt if it is realized by calmer and quieter nationalities. But leaving hypothesis, we will examine briefly the few first names of note which appear in our literary annals of the revolutionary era.

First by prominence of quantity is that nondescript poem called by courtesy an "epic"—the *Columbiad*: it was probably after some attempt at psychal elevation, through the agency of Joel Barlow, that Poe, in a state of distraction, pronounced his opinion on "long poems." As this is a book very frequently referred to, but seldom read, we may, perhaps, earn the gratitude of the indolent "Bohemians" by saving them the trouble of perusal, by a brief description of its plan and contents.

The *Columbiad* grew out of a series of poems written under the general title of *Visions of Columbus*. These, subsequently connected and enlarged, became what the author left his work when he dedicated it to Robert Fulton. The poetic object, on the face of the text, is to soothe the wounded spirit of Columbus during his unjust imprisonment in Spain by sending to him the gentle spirit Hesper, to reveal to him the

immense benefit he had conferred upon the human race by his magnificent discovery. But the *real* object of the author, as he tells us in his preface, is "to encourage in the rising generation, a sense of the importance of republican institutions, as the foundation of public and private happiness.

It would perhaps have added something to the popularity of the poem, if the author could have been content to have adopted any other measure than heroic verse, this having become so indelibly associated in the minds of scholars with the works of the great master singers of antiquity, that a dealer with modern events, though these may be intrinsically more important than the antique, brings his work to a most trying test, by forcing in the very measure a comparison with them. The proximity of the events narrated in the fifth, sixth and seventh books, to the time of the publication of the poem, proved too much for the genius of Barlow. In attempting to satisfy the imagination he deliberately outraged the facts of history in relation to matters in which, probably, half of his readers had been actors or witnesses: thus he unites the military actions of Sumter in South Carolina with that of Jackson in Georgia at the battle of Eutaw, and connects with it the naval conflict of De Grass and Graves. So he also joins the exploits of Stark, Herkimer, Brown and Francis in the one battle of Saratoga! But possibly even this amount of poetical license might have been overlooked if the interest of the poem had been concentrated upon any sufficiently prominent heroic character. But in this the author fails entirely—Columbus being entirely passive throughout, except as a querist, and no other towering so far above his fellows as that we can say *this* is the hero. There is an immense quantity of information in the book on all sorts of historical, geographical and scientific subjects, making it an excellent encyclopedia, but hardly a second-rate epic. Too great discursiveness is its great fault.

The first three books are taken up with Hesper's account of the American continent, and the races which inhabited it, previous to its discovery by Columbus; then the unexhausted talker goes back, as it were, and gives a general review of the then state of Europe. Then he returns to the western hemisphere and takes up the history of the North American colonies, including the war of independence, and shows in the eighth book, in the spirit of prophecy, the results of the free civilization inaugurated at the peace of 1783: and lest any sort of knowledge should be excluded, the Vision is suspended in the ninth

book, to enable Columbus to ask certain questions on the progress of science, which Hesper expounds at great length, and not without ability.

The only great thoughts in the poem are Utopian in the extreme, except as a millennial possibility. In the last books the idea is brought forward, that the Federal system is destined to be extended over the whole earth, which will lead to an assimilation, and finally a union of all languages into one. Among the best passages are those which describe a congress of all nations for the purpose of establishing the political harmony of mankind; and also that wherein the representatives of superstitious and corrupt systems of every kind, bring the symbols of their prominent errors and lay them at the feet of Truth.

The Columbiad was written with the purest patriotic intentions, and evinces a varied knowledge of man and nature, displaying fair ability, and occasionally sparks of the true poetic fire, but has not sustaining genius to give it brilliancy enough to light the nation on its way to political and moral Truth as its author hoped to do. The following extract will give a fair idea of the style:

"Sage Franklin next arose with cheerful mien  
And smil'd unruffled o'er the solemn scene;  
His locks of age a various crown embraced,  
Palm of all arts that e'er a mortal graced.  
Beneath him lay the sceptre kings had borne,  
And the taine thunder from the tempest torn.  
Wythe, Mason, Pendleton, with Henry join'd  
Rush, Rodney Langdon, friends of human kind.  
Persuasive Dickenson, the 'farmers' boast,  
*Recording Thompson, pride of all the host;*  
Nash, Jay, the Livingstons in council great,  
Rutledge and Laurens held the rolls of fate.  
O'er wide creation roll'd their ardent eyes  
And bade the oppress'd to self-existence rise."

The above roll-call is scarcely so sonorous as that of the gods on Olympus, or even the paladins of Charlemagne at Roncevallos, but what can a poet do who has to deal with such names as Pendleton, Dickenson and Thompson. It reminds us of Byron's exclamation upon Southey's poetical friend, Joseph Cottle—

"Phœbus! what a name,

To fill the sounding trump of future fame!"

A more successful but less laborious poet was John Trumbull, the author of "McFingal, an epic poem in four cantos." This is a witty satire in the Hudibrastic vein, published in parts during the war, and collectively after peace was declared. Its object was to bring Toryism into contempt in the personation of Squire McFingal, a Scottish-born Tory and justice of the peace in Massachusetts. The story consists of the account

of two town meetings, in which the mock hero McFingal and one Honorius, a Whig, have nearly all the discussion to themselves, and in which the Tory, with abundance of chop-stick logic, ever manages to stultify and overthrow his own arguments. The Whigs then go *en masse* to raise a liberty pole, which, as justice of the peace, McFingal endeavors to prevent, by reading the riot act and calling for a posse to quell the mob. The end of which was that he was seized by the liberty men, and put in process of conversion after a novel fashion.

"Then from the pole's sublimest top,  
They speeded to let down the rope;  
At once its other end in haste they bind  
And make it fast unto his waistband,  
Till, like the earth as stretched on tenter  
He hung self-balanced on his centre;  
Then upwards all hands hoisting sail  
They swung him like a keg of ale,  
Till to the pinnacle so fair  
He rose like meteor in the air."

So well located for observation, he speedily began to espy his Tory errors, and confess them accordingly, and a vote having been taken that his confession be accepted, he was restored to terra firma and the perpendicular, on promise of future good behavior. But conversion under duress was no more likely to remain permanent in those days than these, and McFingal accordingly recanted almost as soon as he found himself at liberty, pleading that

"No man e'er felt the halter draw  
With good opinion of the law,  
Or failed to lose, by sheriff's shears,  
At once his loyalty and ears."

The finale was, that he was treated to a suit of the national costume of tar and feathers, paraded round the town and left at evening, sticking, by aid of the warm tar, to the liberty pole. The mob here leaving him, he soon after breaks away, and escapes to his own house, where, in a dark cellar, he convenes his old Tory accomplices, and there reveals to them what his hereditary gift of second-sight enables him to perceive impending over their party, and at the end of his prophetic disclosures, the whole company ingloriously conclude to abandon the town.

This poem has the merit of exciting the reader's curiosity to the end; it is brisk in its movement throughout—even the discussion is replete with so much genuine humor that it never wearies. The raciness of the descriptions, and the absence of those prosaic platitudes which exhaust our patience with his two friendly rivals in the poetic art, Barlow and Dwight, sufficiently account for the popularity it attained in the

author's lifetime; it passed through six editions, and would be read with interest now but for the overwhelming flood of books which threaten to consign to oblivion much that might be worth preserving of the past. Trumbull's satire, "The Progress of Dulness," we may refer to under another head.

How any one could hope to create a poem of general interest out of such materials as the "Conquest of Canaan," is a mystery. But it shows the prevailing Hebraic character of our earlier theologians, when so superior a mind as that of President Timothy Dwight's should select an episode of Jewish history whereon to waft himself into fame upon poetical pinions. But our wonder is increased when robbing his subject of all that could have added picturesqueness or sacredness to his theme, he with folly prepense strips it of every distinctive quality, ignoring the characteristics of the age and nationality of his subject, endeavoring to endue his *propriae personæ* merely with the characters, feelings and demeanor incident to human nature during a war of conquest anywhere. His actors have hence no personality, and his description of the destruction of the Hittites and Amorites, would answer nearly as well for the Chinese or Pequods. Had it not been for the distinction which Dwight subsequently attained in another branch of literature, this ill-conceived scriptural epic would effectually have smothered his early hopes of distinction.

This triumvirate in the heavy line being disposed of, we turn to the ballad minstrelsy of the same era to see what the tide of time has wafted down to us likely to attain a continued longevity.

Prominent among the song-writers of the period was Philip Freneau. Jefferson attributed to him the salvation of the country from a return to monarchical institutions: he was an inveterate opponent of Washington's administration, and a partisan of the French interest during the latter years of the 18th century. He was connected for many years with the newspaper press, in which most of his songs and poems made their first appearance. One addressed "To a Truly Great Man," is said to have had a striking influence upon the politics of the day—we quote two verses:

"George, on thy virtues often have I dwelt,  
And still the theme is grateful to mine ear;  
Thy gold let chemists ten times overmelt,  
From dross and base alloy they'll find it clear.  
\* \* \* \* \*  
That thou hast nobly served the state,  
The nation owns and freely gives thee thanks;  
But, sir, whatever speculators prate,  
She gave thee not the power to establish banks."

But Freneau's naval songs, though not as familiar to ears polite as some others, did their full share in keeping alive the national spirit; and though seldom met with in collections of poetry, are sung in our naval ships and by the crews of our merchantmen, with almost as much spirit to-day as when first published. Some of them will undoubtedly last as long as the names of the heroes they celebrate are remembered. One of the most popular is that on the "Victory of Paul Jones in the Bon Homme Richard," commencing

"O'er the rough main with flowing sheet,  
The guardian of a numerous fleet,  
Serapis from the Baltic came."

Another is that spirited song,

"Four gallant ships from England came,  
Freighted deep with fire and flame . . .  
. . . . To have a dash at Stonington."

The origin of the tune of Yankee Doodle is ascribed to a Dr. Shackburg of the British army, but as Duyckinck asserts, the tune is a common one among the tramping German reapers, who go to Holland to assist in the harvesting, receiving for their pay as much buttermilk as they can drink and a tenth of the produce which they safely harvest. It is there sung to the following words:

"Yanker didel doodel down  
Didel, dudel lanter  
Yanke viver, voover vown  
Botermilk und Tenther."

Whoever adapted the commonly received words to this tune, was probably not much of a poet in any sense of the word, but his rhyme, aided by the sister art of music, has probably set more hearts and pulses beating high for native land than did ever the witty epic of Trumbull, or the ponderous patriotism of Barlow.

Several ladies of this period produced songs of various degrees of merit, referring to incidents of the times; one by a lady of Virginia, whose name we have not ascertained, was quite popular while the "tea-tax" question was before the people, and like some of our modern political campaign songs, moved many to a practical enthusiasm beyond the power of mere argument to produce. It commences,

"Begone pernicious, baneful tea,  
By all Pandora's ills possess'd."

Its timeliness was, however, its chief merit; its singing *now* would scarcely affect the tea market injuriously.

There is extant a very spirited song, written by a Vermont poet, of some historical interest as

descriptive of the primitive costume and habits of the Green Mountain Boys. One verse is as follows:

"Ho! all to the borders! Vermonters come down,  
With your breeches of deer-skin, your jackets of brown,  
With your red woollen caps and your moccasins come,  
To the gathering sound of trumpet and drum—  
Our vow is recorded, our banner unfurl'd  
In the name of Vermont—we defy all the world!"

We close these revolutionary excerpts by a verse from a favorite song of the period, and still sung to the old English tune of "Hearts of Oak;" it is ascribed by some to Dickenson, the author of the "Farmer's Letters," and by others to Mrs. Mercy Warren, sister of James Otis, and quite a noted and prolific poetess in her day.

"Come join hand in hand brave Americans all,  
*By uniting we stand, by dividing we fall.*  
In so righteous a cause let us hope to succeed,  
For Heaven approves each generous deed.

*Chorus.* In freedom we're born, and in freedom we'll live,  
Our purses are ready,  
Steady, friends, steady,  
Not as slaves, but as freemen, our money we'll give."

#### A LEGEND OF NIAGARA.

AN Indian, in the days of yore—  
Of "fish and fur's" abounding store—  
Would cross Niagara's stream—  
Just where the river, smooth and wide,  
Pours toward the gulf its treacherous tide,  
Like some deceitful dream.

Near by, a bear was crossing, too:  
Whose head no sooner rose to view,  
Than straight the "Brave" urged his canoe  
To grasp an easy prey;  
But Bruin fled not—glad to greet  
A resting-place for weary feet,  
He turned and swam his foe to meet,  
Upon the watery way.

They met—the paddle's blow was dealt;  
With paw received, or scarcely felt  
By fur-protected bear.  
Who, reaching up as for a bough,  
Climbed gracefully into the prow  
And sat serenely there.  
The astonished "Brave" sought in his turn  
The "ultima thule" of the stern,  
And then sat down to stare.

And thus in armed neutrality  
They sat in thoughtful "vis-à-vis,"  
While the bark drifted silently  
To meet the breakers white;